



“Free TV” Too Good to Be True?

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MADISON – The letter begins: “DEADLINE NOTICE: Invention being distributed to Wisconsin residents pulls in Free TV with no cable or satellite bills ever.” Sounds pretty good, right?

If you received this letter advertising a “razor-thin invention” that can help you get free TV programming, you are not alone. Consumers statewide have received these mailings, and many recipients are puzzled by the claims but nervous about missing the “deadline.” The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection has received a number of calls on this product and asks letter recipients to be skeptical of its over-the-top claims.

First off, what is this wonder product? It is essentially a television antenna, not unlike one you might find at a hardware or electronics store starting at around \$10. Consumers who have called the company to inquire about the advertised product have been pitched a price of nearly \$50 for the unit.

How does it get you free programming? The same way your old pair of “rabbit ears” would. Major channels such as ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and PBS broadcast their digital signals live over-the-air. With an antenna, all of this programming is available for free on any high-definition television or analog television set with a digital converter box.

Wisconsin is not the only state that has seen this promotion. The company has placed full-page newspaper ads nationwide that are strategically designed to look like news stories on the “invention.” The Idaho and West Virginia Better Business Bureaus have cautionary write-ups on their websites about this product and its advertisements.

Here are examples of the confusing language in the sales pitch:

- There is no reference to the price of the unit or the need to make any purchase.
- The word “Free” is used repeatedly in the ad and is capitalized for effect in nearly every instance. Examples include “Free TV,” “Free TV channels,” “Free over-the-air TV shows,” and “Free TV shows.”
- The ad states that users can receive as many as 953 TV shows for free. Many consumers are confused by this claim, believing that the company is suggesting that up to 953 channels are available.
- The ad is referred to as a “deadline notice” with a deadline of May 21, 2012. It mentions that “Only Wisconsin residents who respond by May 21, 2012 are authorized to get the razor-thin invention...” With no price listed in the ad and numerous uses of the word “Free,” this deadline leads consumers to think they can receive this item for free if they call before May 21.
- The ad repeatedly mentions the zip code area of the recipient, leading consumers to believe that they have been specially selected for the offer.
- In three pages of documentation there is only one instance where the item is referred to as a “digital HDTV antenna.” In other instances, the product is touted as a “razor-thin invention” that utilizes “printed circuit technology combined with an advanced omnidirectional design” to receive free local and national broadcasts.
- It refers to the product as “a great alternative” to cable and satellite services, but does not mention that users would not receive any programming outside of any over-the-air ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, PBS and local feeds that reach the antenna.

(MORE)

If you are interested in getting free over-the-air programming, you can certainly inquire with the company about its product, but remember that the “razor-thin invention” is just a modern-day repackaging of technology that has existed in American living rooms for decades.

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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